

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

He's here and he's gone; he's here and he's gone ... The experiences of new mothers in rural Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, whose partners work away from home

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ABSTRACT:

Introduction Employment-related mobility (ERM) is a complex phenomenon that impacts family life. New mothers who have partners working away from home for intermittent and extended periods of time are particularly affected. As these families transition to parenting roles they are further challenged with the expectation that the mother manages sole responsibility for family and home life while her partner works away.

Methods: A hermeneutic phenomenology approach was used to explore the experiences of new mothers on the island portion of rural Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, whose partners participated in ERM. Participants were recruited through community health nurses and family resource center staff. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed following Ricoeur's approach.

Results: The essence of the experience of these 19 women was apparent in their stories of adjustment to periods of transition when their partner was working away from home. Five themes were generated from interpretation of the experiences of the participants: 'he's here and he's gone again', 'one-woman show', 'putting myself on the back burner', 'the routine goes out the window' and 'making it work'.

Conclusions: While many women felt overwhelmed with the responsibilities of balancing family life, and often experienced loneliness, others described a smoother adaptation to an ERM lifestyle. The experiences of the mothers warrant consideration to inform health care providers, policymakers and community leaders to be more responsive to the emerging needs of families in these situations.

KEYWORDS:

Canada, coping, employment-related mobility, family life, hermeneutic phenomenology, parenting, support.

FULL ARTICLE:

Introduction

Employment-related mobility (ERM) is a complex phenomenon that impacts family life. New mothers who have partners working away from home for intermittent and extended periods of time are particularly affected. In the Canadian context, ERM has been defined as situations where workers recurrently travel to distant locations for work, often in temporary or mobile workplaces. The resulting absence of male partners/fathers means that mothers ultimately have sole responsibility for the family and household for prolonged periods¹.

Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) is a province in eastern Canada with a population of 529 696, spread over a large geographic area². Sixty percent of this province's population reside in rural communities as defined by the OECD^{3,4}. Limited employment opportunities have resulted in more people seeking employment in distant locations in Canada and worldwide⁵⁻⁷. In 2011, among employees whose residence was NL, the mobile or interprovincial workforce was over 20 000 or 9.9% of workers, who were identified as employees aged 18 or older, earning at least \$1000 per year⁸. Associated with the prospect of a higher income than is possible in rural NL communities, many workers choose to leave home while simultaneously maintaining their residences and supporting their families⁶. With low employment opportunities provincially, it is anticipated ERM will be a reality for NL families for many years ahead⁹.

While there is limited research in Canada about the impact of the separation resulting from ERM on families, research has emerged from Australia. The terms fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) and drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) are used to describe the mobile workforce in much of the relevant Australian literature^{6,10,11}. Researchers have reported both positive and negative psychosocial impacts resulting from this lifestyle. Negative impacts include psychological distress, family dysfunction, poor mental health and substance misuse¹⁰⁻¹³. Families have benefited from higher salaries, improved

communication and extended time at home for the fathers. Others found that parenting is a challenge for FIFO/DIDO families, particularly for mothers at home in managing the continual transitioning from solo parenting to co-parenting. Since 2012, Canadian researchers have been investigating the spectrum of employment-related geographical mobility and its consequences for workers, families, employers, communities and governments. The On the Move Partnership is an international research study working with community partners to investigate ERM in Canada¹⁴.

Social support for new parents has been connected with better maternal mental health, family functioning, parenting competence and relationship satisfaction during the period of role transition¹⁵⁻²⁰. Many parents feel unprepared for parenthood and are often overwhelmed in this new role²¹⁻²³. In NL, new parents are supported by community health nurses (CHNs), who deliver the Healthy Beginnings program, to promote optimal growth and development in children^{24,25}. As early days of mothering may be consumed with anxiety and compounded by limited family support and absentee or intermittently present fathers, it is critical for CHNs to understand the impact of ERM on families and to strive to identify and meet support needs. This article reports on findings from a qualitative research study conducted from 2014 to 2015.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of new mothers on the island portion of rural NL whose partners participated in ERM.

The methodology used for this study was hermeneutic phenomenology. This methodology was chosen as it is suited for understanding the meaning of experiences, within the context as they are lived²⁶. Hermeneutic phenomenology or the interpretive approach is a way of being in the world, and the sociocultural experiences of humans are expressed in language or text, which is central to the philosophy of Ricoeur²⁷. Ricoeur's theory of interpretation provides a richness of understanding of the meaning of reality and illuminates what is known about particular life-world experiences²⁷. The experiences of the women were represented in interviews, which were transcribed verbatim. The text or discourse was then readily available to 'see' what the text said in itself, and ultimately expand the text into meaning, which is described in the results²⁸.

Sample

The 19 participants were new mothers who had children aged 3 years or less, who lived on the island portion of rural NL, and whose partners worked away from home more than 30% of a calendar year. Women living in rural communities (with a population of less than 15 000 people) were recruited, as those living in larger towns and cities would typically have access to more supports than would be available in smaller, rural towns. The participants were aged 25–42 years, had been with their partners between 1 and 20 years (mean 6.45 years) and had one or two children. The partners had been participating in ERM for lengths of time varying from 2 months to 18 years. All participants had attended post-secondary institutions and over 63% had completed university education.

Recruitment

Following receipt of ethics approval, researchers approached CHNs and family resource center (FRC) staff to recruit participants. CHNs are employed and work in every rural community in the province, and FRCs coexist in various rural communities. By engaging CHNs and individuals employed in FRCs, the researchers reached the target population. Information packages containing a letter of introduction, background information and recruitment posters were distributed for public display in the buildings where these staff worked. Potential participants were asked to contact the principal investigator to determine eligibility for the study, and interviews were arranged at the convenience of the mothers.

Data collection

With the participants' written consent, the experiences of the women were captured in interviews that were transcribed verbatim. Interviewing occurred from June 2014 to March 2015; four researchers participated in data collection. Individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 of the 19 women at a location and time

convenient to participants; the two other participants were interviewed by phone. Interviews were framed around an interview guide that included demographic information. The women were encouraged to share their experiences, thoughts and concerns about being a new mother whose partner worked away for extended periods. Data analysis was ongoing throughout data collection and, when no new themes emerged, data collection ceased, as saturation was reached.

Data analysis

Data analysis was inspired by Ricoeur's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology²⁹. Analysis moved from a naive understanding of meaning to an explicit understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon of ERM and the impact on the families. Initially, all four researchers independently read the text as a whole and began to form individual interpretations of the meaning of the experiences of the mothers in this study.

An analytic process of reflection was used by the researchers to apply an interpretive lens to the research data gathered from the women to understand their reality and the meaning of their experiences²⁸. In alignment with Ricoeur's steps in analysis and interpretation of the narrative or stories told by participants, the researchers formed initial impressions of interviews, through naive reading of the transcribed data^{27,29}. In the naive reading, the researchers identified the women's concerns about being a new mother, and the ways in which having a partner who worked away from home for extended periods impacted their lives and wellbeing. Analysis of data did not occur at this beginning phase, but after reading the text several times the researchers began to understand and interpret the meaning of the women's stories. Researchers documented these interpretations of the interviews individually, and then met as a team to compare and discuss their interpretations of the text. This structural analysis validated the initial impressions formed in the naive understanding of data. In the final phase of comprehensive understanding, interpretation of the whole followed and resulted in a description of the essence of the experiences of participants and identification of five themes^{27,29,30}.

Ethics approval

Ethics approval was received from the Health Research Ethics Board in NL on 23 January 2014 (reference number 14.008). Approval was also obtained from each of the four regional health authorities in NL in order to obtain permission to promote the study in CHN office locations.

Results

Through analysis and understanding of the interviews or discourse with the new mothers, the researchers interpreted meaningful themes that reflected the experiences of these women. The structural analyses produced the following five themes and each theme is illustrated by the participants' own words. Themes were 'he's here and he's gone again', 'one-woman show', 'putting myself on the back burner', 'everything goes out the window' and 'making it work'. These themes came to life through the shared voices of the participants, whose names have been changed to protect their identities.

'He's here and he's gone again'

For the women in this study there was constant disruption to family life within the household. The fathers' occupations involved schedules of working away from home from 10 days up to 7 months of time, and then being at home from 4 days to 1–5 weeks per rotation. This cyclical work schedule resulted in the fathers being home for a while, then leaving for weeks at a time, and subsequently coming home again for a short duration. For the mothers and children there was continuous adjustment to the father being home, the settling in, becoming re-acquainted as a family, and the anticipation of him leaving again. Even though the mothers accepted this lifestyle, adjustments were necessary.

It is like a stranger in your home ... I find he [husband] throws everything off, because, like Oh My God, I find it hard to adjust when he comes home. Everything is up in the air, the house is always untidy, and nothing goes as planned, because he's home and I'm thinking, oh I'll put this off because he'll do it later. It's good to have him home, but it's so different. (Carol)

It's a struggle when he comes home and leaves again ... I have to learn how to live with someone else again. I got into my routine and my schedule so that when he got home, he was messing things up. (Tonya)

When talking about how she felt when her husband returned to work, Carol shared a poignant comment: 'Your whole world gets put on that plane'.

I drop him off now. I don't go in the terminal; I don't want anyone to see me upset because it's too difficult. We go to the airport, he goes and checks in; he'll say good-bye to the boys and he'll say good-bye to me and then we'll just drive away. (Carol)

The participants frequently compared themselves to other women whose husbands were home at the end of each workday. They stated they were different than single parents, and grieved their partners' absence while he was working away.

Really, like their husbands come home 5 o'clock, they all have supper, they all watch TV, or whatever, and then go on to bed. For me it's like he's dead for two weeks, he's gone. You don't even see him. (Joanna)

'One-woman show'

A reality of the intermittent absence of the father was that the mothers had sole responsibility for the family and household, often for weeks or months at a time. Taken-for-granted tasks usually considered 'simple' were perceived as being more complex. In addition to carrying out the work involved with traditional gender roles, participants were required to assume the roles carried out by the father in his absence. During their 'solo' parenting, mothers described various challenges.

When he went back to work, it was ... like a shock, where I was used to having him here where I was so new [as a mother] and she [daughter] was so little and I had no idea what I was doing. I was frightened to death. What I find most stressful is I'm solely responsible for this tiny child in terms of her sickness, what to feed her, when to introduce new foods, if something comes up with a change in her, if she's off schedule, if she's teething, for the most part - it's a vicious cycle. (Jane)

I asked my friend to come over long enough for me to mow the lawn, and holy heck I was only out there ten minutes and the darn thing caught on fire. I literally could have sat down and cried because, the funny thing is, had my husband had been home he would know the difference, and he'd just shut it off ... I guess that would be a simple day-to-day task, and it's ten times more frustrating. (Joanna)

Loneliness was an aspect of being in a 'one-woman show'. Most of the women talked about feeling lonely 'all the time'. Even though many of the participants had extended family and friends nearby, some women expressed a profound sense of loneliness. This loneliness was experienced in relation to the absence of a partner to share child care as well as in the need for companionship and socialization.

I'm lonely all the time. I work; I pick my kid up from day care, and come home. Before, I would be able to leave him with my husband and go get a haircut, or, if he [husband] wanted to go fishing he'd leave the baby - we traded off really well. And now, it's extremely lonely, constant loneliness ... (Joanna)

In the middle of the night when she's [daughter's] up, at the end of the day, I'm still here by myself or if she gets sick, I'm here by myself. I do have a break here and there in the daytime. I find that's not where you really need it. You need it in the night when she goes to bed, and you're just by yourself. That's when you need the company. (Jane)

Seeking assistance from others helped to ease the overwhelming sense of loneliness amidst the responsibility, when in a 'one-woman show'. Living in a community where many families were in a similar situation helped reduce the sense of loneliness and solo responsibility.

I have a friend, so if I'm having a bad day I may call her, or vice versa. When your husband is away you need somebody to talk to. (Rebecca)

Some mothers recounted safety concerns for themselves and their children, when trying to balance traditional and non-traditional gender roles with the care of the children.

Well I actually had to go out and shovel because we had a lot of snow and it turned to rain and then it was supposed to freeze. I waited until the baby was asleep and went outside with the monitor and I locked myself out; and my only option was to call 911 and have the fire department come and break the lock off my door. (Catherine)

Others felt the weight of responsibility on their shoulders.

The baby sleeps in bed with me because when my husband is gone I feel that I want everyone together; because I feel I'm the one, the main person of the house, and I have to take care of everybody, if someone breaks in, or something happens ... everything is on you. (Karen)

When fathers returned home, even for short periods, some mothers experienced feelings of relief, which differed from feelings expressed earlier by other mothers.

I'm relieved. I just can't wait to get him here. Then, when he's here, it's a big relief (sigh). I don't have to be afraid in the nighttime; I don't have to worry about the driveway being shoveled and then as the week goes on, those emotions just change. (Jane)

'Putting myself on the back burner'

Several mothers talked about how they were unable to keep up with the demands of a career in addition to maintaining the household and caring for children while their partners were away. They often felt they had to put careers on hold and self-care on the 'back burner'. Consequently, some chose to give up their jobs temporarily. Carol, a travel nurse noted:

I was due to go back (to work) after one year, and I couldn't see myself being gone all the time, and my husband being gone all the time, and my child being raised by a nanny. I didn't want my son to be raised that way, so I decided to leave my job.

The women who chose to work shared their challenges with maintaining a balance, noting there were sacrifices and limited opportunities for career advancement.

My career has taken a back seat to my husband's ... and it's hard to advance. You can't attend seminars or workshops if they are held out of town. I have turned down overtime ... all my annual leave, family leave and sick leave is used up because I have no one to help me when I need time off or when the babysitter is sick ... if I am sick there is no one to care for me. (Catherine)

As much as I would love to stay home, I just feel like I have done too much to just throw it all away. I moved away for school and did my Masters [degree]. (Ann)

When discussing self-care, many mothers felt it was non-existent, particularly when fathers were away.

Oh it sucks, I get no self-care. By the time my son goes to bed, I'm scrounging for a snack, putting dishes in the dishwasher, packing my lunch, packing his daycare bag all at the same time. Two weeks gone, it's not nice. (Joanna)

I have made 3 appointments for my hair and have had to cancel all 3 because I had no support whatsoever. (Susan)

Having little time for oneself and sole responsibility for family and household responsibilities evoked strong emotional responses in some women. Time alone was almost non-existent when the fathers were away.

My quiet time, sometimes when the kids are going crazy, I put them in a car seat and we go for a coffee ... that's how I clear my head. (Cindy)

You don't want to use the word resentment, but that's probably the word that comes to mind sometimes when you get really frustrated with it. (Lori)

'The routine goes out the window'

Going between two worlds, when the father was home and when he was gone, created a disruption for the families. For many, establishing a routine while the father was away was key to coping. This was often referred to as 'finding a new normal'.

It takes 3–4 days to settle in to dad being gone and for us to get into a routine and then it kind of settles into a schedule and then it's not as bad. (Cindy)

Everything has to be thought out before I do it ... you have to have a schedule. (Karen)

Sometimes it's hard for my husband to come home. Like we're on a schedule, naptime is 12:30. I have to push and say ... no this is the schedule and we have to stick to it. And the kids function so much better. (Cindy)

When the fathers returned, the routines the women worked hard at establishing literally vanished. Some women described the change in the home as 'chaos'. Having another adult back in the house was an adjustment with each return trip home.

... and then daddy comes home and all hell breaks loose. (Carol)

There is no schedule – that goes out the window. It's really hard to keep a schedule when he's home, especially for him [son] because he gets excited when his dad comes home and then he [son] doesn't want to go to bed because he wants to stay up and play ... it kind of goes haywire. (Rebecca)

Maintaining the routine was a challenge for the mothers. Often the father returned home from working many consecutive shifts, frequently traveling a long distance through various time zones, and needed time to adjust to home life.

And he comes home and it's like, okay well, I've got a week off, and [he feels] 'this is my vacation time' ... it's not a vacation from life ... it's not a vacation from being a parent or husband. (Carol)

I think he feels misplaced sometimes when he comes home because we are in a routine and he just doesn't know what's going on. Our daughter doesn't know him, like when he comes in the door she'll just look at him strange ... yes 5 weeks is a long time when you're little. (Karen)

'Making it work'

Many women accepted that the lifestyle with their partners on the 'turnaround' was the way life had to be. They preferred that their partners had the option to stay and work nearer home, or in the same province with a shorter commute. These women recognized that, in order to have a financially stable life, it was necessary that their partners come and go for work, and that intermittent disruption to the household was certain. While knowingly having a 'part-time' partner at home was challenging, having a positive attitude and outlook helped the mothers manage. Being proactive versus reactive was found to be a mitigating factor for meeting demands such as household and car maintenance, and yard work, when the partner was away. These families were committed to making this lifestyle work

because in many cases it was a choice they had made.

This is the life we have chosen and we're going to have to do the best we can. (Lori)

We knew what we were getting into when we signed up for this. (Cindy)

These mothers were empathetic towards their partners and respectful of the relationship.

We're a team. I try to have a positive attitude but some days it's super hard – [I am] looking forward versus looking at what was missed. You feel accomplished when you get to the end of it on your own. (Paula)

I'm home in NL where we want to be. I get to spend every day with [baby]. My partner's got it worse than me. (Natasha)

The women we interviewed demonstrated strength and resilience as evidenced by their willingness to 'make it work'.

These are the things that we have to do and that's it! (Karen)

I just do it. (Ann)

CHNs, FRCs and breastfeeding support groups were often identified as supportive resources. Many mothers also indicated they relied on the internet for information.

There is support online at all hours. (Natasha)

I go to the Family Resource Centre. (Jane)

I was in a better place after the public health nurse visited. (Jennifer)

Breastfeeding support group and baby group were phenomenal – such a great support. (Lori)

The mothers in this study also acknowledged that support from others was important in 'making it work'. The amount and type of support varied between families. Some mothers required practical support with things such as snow clearing and household maintenance, while others needed companionship and understanding.

I rely on my Mom quite a bit. (Lori)

I never pass up an opportunity for a play date. (Stacy)

The support here is awesome – neighbors, community center, nurses, everybody. (Rebecca)

Women identified the need to connect with their partner when he was away for work. In some cases, there was access to technology so that texting, FaceTime, Skype or a phone call could be done daily. In other cases, there was little or no communication for the entire time the partners were away.

He is watching her grow up on FaceTime and Facebook and all that. (Jane)

Even with access to technology, given the difference in time zones and work schedules many mothers were left to figure things out on their own.

So you've got to wait four hours before you can find where the heck something is because there's no way of contacting him. (Carol)

Discussion

New mothers shared a variety of experiences resulting from the separation of their partners when they were working away from home for periods of time. The mothers in this study revealed that while the lifestyle they led was 'normal' for them, they felt it was not well understood and appreciated by others. They recognized that some of the challenges they faced when 'he's here and when he's gone again' may not be challenges for other mothers whose partners worked

closer to home. Fresle found that the women in her study had a desire to meet other FIFO wives and were ‘... keen to make suggestions in order to help others adapt to the lifestyle’³¹ (p. 32).

Participants openly described their feelings and emotions associated with periods of transition – times when their partners were working away, upon their return and when they were preparing to leave for work. While these feelings were similar and predictable, they were often in conflict as mothers struggled to readjust to having another adult in the home. Managing the care of young children and a household by themselves took its toll on many of the mothers, with the responsibilities of being in a ‘one-woman show’. Lack of time for self and missing both adult companionship and the emotional support of a partner resulted in a sense of increasing loneliness. Various researchers reported that loneliness and social isolation were significant issues for mothers whose partners worked away^{11,31,32}.

Upon a partner’s return home, while there was relief to share parenting and household activities, in many families there was also tension as pre-established routines were altered, as ‘everything goes out the window’. For some families, the sheer relief of having the partner home superseded the need for maintaining consistent structured routines, while other families struggled to maintain a semblance of routine. Just as families were adjusting to being reunited, the time quickly came to prepare for the partner’s return to work. During this phase, some women, anticipating their partners’ absence, began to feel stressed and anxious, realizing they would soon be on their own. Other women expressed relief that they could return to comfortable routines. An Australian study of FIFO families with young children identified a similar range of emotions that mothers at home experienced during the away and home cycle³³.

Living a hectic lifestyle led many of the mothers to voice how they had to ‘put myself on the back burner’. The notion of putting their children’s and partners’ needs before their own was noted in daily life, self-care and career advancement. In the present study, all participants had post-secondary education and over 63% had completed university. Some women were career-oriented and reported they had worked too hard to just ‘give it all up’; others chose to forgo their careers, at least temporarily. Those who chose to continue working felt they had to make career sacrifices, which resulted in limited opportunities for career advancement. The ERM lifestyle added additional stress to their busy lives as they attempted to balance other roles at home and work. Scheduling routine appointments and finding quiet time for themselves were identified as challenging by the women. The women found it important to have a routine and to plan in advance to make their busy lives more manageable. This finding differed from much of the Australian research in which participants worked part-time and not necessarily for career advancement, rather for socialization^{31,33}. An additional new finding in this Canadian study, related to mothers working full time outside the home while their partner was working away, was the need for these women to be both organized and prepared for the time period when the partner was away. Some factors impacting the need to be organized, unique to this study environment, include the harsher climate, with seasonal extremes in weather.

The participants provided insight about what was involved to ‘make it work’ in this ERM lifestyle. While there were challenges, these women demonstrated resilience and a commitment to making it work because in most cases it was the life they had chosen with their partners. Other researchers have identified that a positive outlook contributes to family resilience and is an important factor for women to manage the FIFO lifestyle^{31,33}.

A mitigating factor in ‘making it work’ was the couple’s ability to communicate on a regular basis. Some participants did not have access to any type of communication technology, while others had occasional or full access to phone calls, Skype, FaceTime, Facebook and texting. Several authors referenced the importance of communication and how it helped to alleviate the difficulty of the father being away^{13,31,33}.

Fresle reported that support needs of the women at home involved emotional support and instrumental support such as help with household management³¹, a finding consistent with the present research. Other researchers identified that new mothers expected support from partners and families and believed this support should be provided without asking³⁴. Gallegos found that access to social support was important not only to make this lifestyle choice a success, but also to increase stability while partners were away³³.

The qualitative data collected in this study contributes to new knowledge of experiences of mothers and families when

partners work away from home. It is the first known study capturing the unique experiences from the mothers' perspectives, on the island portion of a sparsely populated province in Canada. A limitation to consider is the educational level of participants – it would be interesting to discover the experiences of women with less than post-secondary education. Recruitment was affected by practical limitations including financial, geographical and time constraints. The enthusiasm and willingness of the women who wanted to share their stories contributed to a new understanding of a rapidly emerging phenomenon of international relevance.

Conclusions

Utilizing a phenomenological approach, content of the semi-structured interviews conducted for this study was analyzed, interpretations explored and themes identified. Giving voice to the uniqueness of the ERM lifestyle was a source of validation for the participants, who said they benefited from the opportunity to tell their stories. These women felt there was little understanding of their situation and appreciation for how difficult it was. They expressed hope that their stories, now heard, would assist other women and their families leading similar lifestyles.

This research added a deeper understanding of the experience of the ERM lifestyle for women and their families. The findings may inform CHNs and decision makers about the importance of the impact of ERM-affected households on new mothers. The knowledge can assist healthcare providers to identify needs and provide appropriate assistance and support. This research study merits international attention and further exploration of related phenomena are warranted, such as interviews with women who report high school or less education, women who lack social support and assistance, women in urban areas and the experiences of fathers working in an ERM lifestyle. It would be valuable to hear the voices of the children as they age and the impact of ERM on their childhood experiences.

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